

Plight of the Rohingya minority in Myanmar/Burma

The brutal military crackdown since October 2016 in Myanmar/Burma's Rakhine State has highlighted the tragic situation of Muslim Rohingya, often described as one of the most persecuted minorities in the world. Deprived of citizenship and basic freedoms at home, those who risk their lives to escape can at best hope for a precarious existence abroad.

Thousands of Rohingya flee a brutal military crackdown

On 25 August 2017, insurgents from the [Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army](#) (ARSA) attacked police bases in Rakhine State, killing 12 officers. Events since then have taken a similar course to the crisis caused by ARSA's previous attacks on 9 October 2016, but on an even more horrific scale: Rohingya fleeing the violence describe villages burned to the ground, mass rapes and killings ([over 1 000](#) according to UN estimates). These accounts cannot be verified on the ground, as the military has closed off affected areas, but are corroborated by such evidence as refugees' [gunshot wounds](#) and journalists' eyewitness [accounts](#) of Buddhist mobs, unhindered by security forces, setting fire to Rohingya houses. So far, [400 000](#) Rohingya have fled to neighbouring Bangladesh, over five times as many as in the previous wave of violence.



Who are the Rohingya?

The Rohingya are a Muslim minority in Myanmar/Burma; until recently, around 1 million lived in Rakhine, where they made up nearly one third of the population, the remainder being Buddhist Arakanese. Pre-colonial [historical documents](#) show that Muslims have lived in the region and identified themselves as Rohingya for centuries; however, many Rohingya are descended from Indian and Bangladeshi workers who arrived under British rule (1824-1948). The Myanmar/Burma authorities refuse to accept them as a native ethnic group, instead treating them as illegal immigrants and referring to them as 'Bengali' rather than 'Rohingya'.

A long history of persecution

Unfortunately, there is nothing new about the recent violence. The Rohingya were targeted by previous military [crackdowns](#) in 1978 and 1991, and by [mob violence](#) in 2012. Security forces, while not actually instigating riots in 2012, [did little](#) to protect Rohingya, and in some cases sided with Buddhist mobs against them. Each of these incidents left hundreds dead and displaced hundreds of thousands more.

Since the 2012 riots, over 100 000 internally displaced Rohingya have been interned in [overcrowded camps](#). Outside the camps, they also face severe discrimination. The 1982 [Burma Citizenship Law](#) excludes them from the list of 135 recognised ethnic groups, meaning that individuals can only acquire citizenship by proving that they had ancestors in the country prior to its 1948 independence. The difficulty of doing so has left all but [40 000](#) stateless. As non-citizens, they must obtain official permits to leave their townships, even for a few hours, and are forbidden to have more than two children. They were allowed to vote in the 2010 elections, but in 2015 this right was [taken away](#) from them. Rohingya-majority areas have up to 100 times as many patients per doctor as neighbouring non-Rohingya areas, and child mortality is [four times](#) higher. In some townships, nearly [one in five](#) children were afflicted by acute malnutrition, even before the current crisis.

Persecution reflects popular fears and prejudices as well as government policy

Democratic reforms and greater freedom of speech have aggravated [historical prejudices](#), by allowing Buddhist extremists to whip up hatred against Muslims and the Rohingya in particular, for example during the October 2012 [anti-Rohingya riots](#). Protests in 2015 against the previous government's [proposal](#) to allow the Rohingya to vote showed how unpopular the minority is.

This text updates an earlier ['at a glance note'](#), published in February 2017.



The Rohingya diaspora

Over 1 million Rohingya have fled violence in Myanmar/Burma to other countries, including Bangladesh (in 2016, before the latest exodus, up to [500 000](#)), Pakistan ([500 000](#)), Saudi Arabia ([250 000](#)) and Malaysia ([55 000](#)). None of these countries has signed the [UN Refugee Convention](#), and none accepts Rohingya as refugees. At best, the Rohingya are reluctantly tolerated as illegal migrants, living on the fringes of society without access to proper housing, healthcare or education. Many are even less lucky; in 2015, Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia refused to allow starving Rohingya in rickety boats to land, putting their lives at risk by [towing them](#) back out to sea. Those following the overland route often fall prey to human traffickers, who hold them in [jungle camps](#) to seek ransoms from relatives or sell as slave labour to [Thai fishing boats](#).

Responses to the Rohingya crisis

For the Rohingya, little has changed since the 2015 election of Aung San Suu Kyi

The government's capacity to protect Rohingya is severely constrained, both by popular prejudices against the minority and the [2008 Constitution](#), which gives the military unfettered powers on security matters. However, in August 2016, Suu Kyi asked former United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, to head an advisory commission, including international experts, to study ethnic tensions in Rakhine State. Its [report](#), published in August 2017, recommends allowing Rohingya to apply for citizenship, and clarifying the status and rights of citizens and non-citizens alike. On 14 September 2017, an [implementation committee](#) was set up to act on these recommendations, but public opinion is likely to oppose any changes to citizenship law.

Responding to the first wave of recent violence in October 2016, Myanmar/Burma launched a national enquiry headed by an ex-general, which [announced](#) in August 2017 that there was no evidence of crimes against humanity. In May 2017 the country [rejected](#) a proposed United Nations investigation.

In the current wave of violence, the government has consistently backed the military's line: '[clearance operations](#)' are necessary to protect civilians from terrorist attacks; [400 have died](#), nearly all of them insurgents. According to the military, neither its own forces nor Buddhist civilians are to blame for the fires which have destroyed many villages; these were started by Rohingya insurgents, who have displaced [30 000 Buddhists](#) from their homes. Myanmar/Burma's de facto leader, [Aung San Suu Kyi](#), and state media denounce any information which departs from this version as '[fake news](#)'.

Bangladesh struggles to accept more Rohingya refugees

Nearly all the displaced Rohingya have fled to Bangladesh, putting their lives at risk from [landmines](#) or, after Bangladesh [attempted](#) to close its borders to them, a perilous [sea crossing](#). Even before the current crisis, refugee camps were already overcrowded; [additional camps](#) are now hastily being constructed to accommodate the newcomers. As a long-term solution, the country plans to [relocate](#) the Rohingya to Thengar Char, but the suitability of this uninhabited, remote and flood-prone island has been questioned.

Mounting international outrage at persecution of the Rohingya and Suu Kyi's inaction

There is mounting international criticism of Suu Kyi – a Sakharov and Nobel Peace Prize winner, and herself detained by the former military junta for many years – and her failure to speak out against, let alone tackle the military's crimes against the Rohingya. Fellow Nobel Peace Prize winners such as [Malala Yousafzai](#) have called on Suu Kyi to act, while on 13 September 2017, UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, [denounced](#) 'ethnic cleansing'. [Malaysia](#), [Turkey](#), and [Iran](#) are among the Muslim-majority countries whose leaders, backed by popular protests, have accused the Myanmar/Burma authorities of genocide; Al Qaeda terrorists have [sworn](#) vengeance for crimes against Rohingya Muslims. [China](#) and [Russia](#) are more sympathetic to the Myanmar/Burma authorities, but did not block a statement on 13 September by the UN Security Council condemning 'excessive violence' and calling for 'immediate steps' to end it.

EU response: In 2017, the EU has contributed over [€12 million](#) of humanitarian aid to Myanmar/Burma, and committed [€50 million](#) of development aid. A large part of this supports the Rohingya, for example through healthcare for those living in camps, as well as longer-term programmes to reduce rural poverty.

Recent statements by EU High Representative, Federica Mogherini express [concern](#), while calling for restraint and [access](#) for humanitarian aid. The European Parliament has been particularly outspoken, condemning the persecution of the Rohingya in several resolutions. In its most recent [resolution](#), adopted on 14 September 2017, it calls on the Myanmar/Burma military to end violence and urged Suu Kyi to speak out against discrimination, raising the possibility of revoking the Sakharov Prize awarded to her in 1990 as a human rights defender. The Parliament also warns of possible sanctions against Myanmar/Burma.